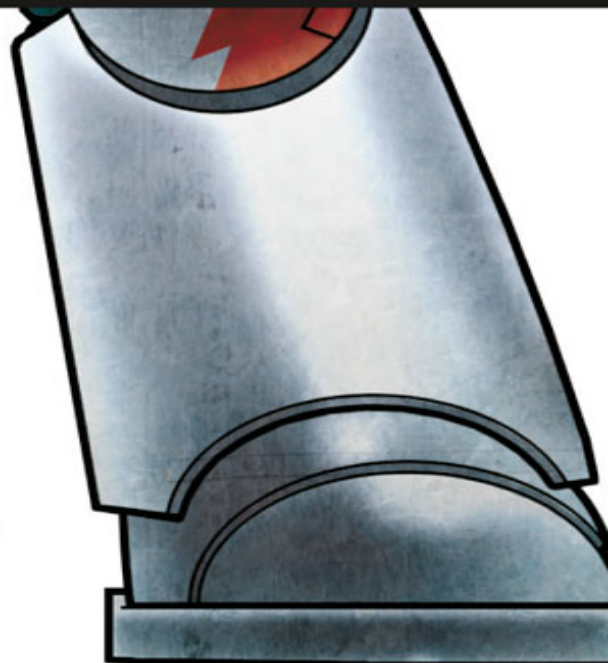


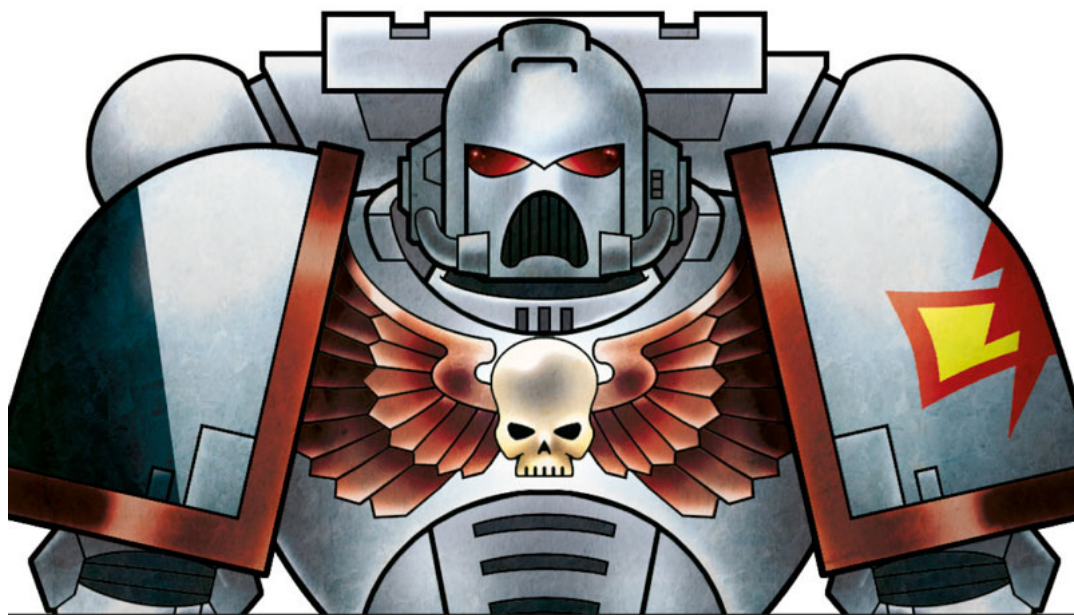
— *Angels of Death* —

THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

ANTHONY REYNOLDS



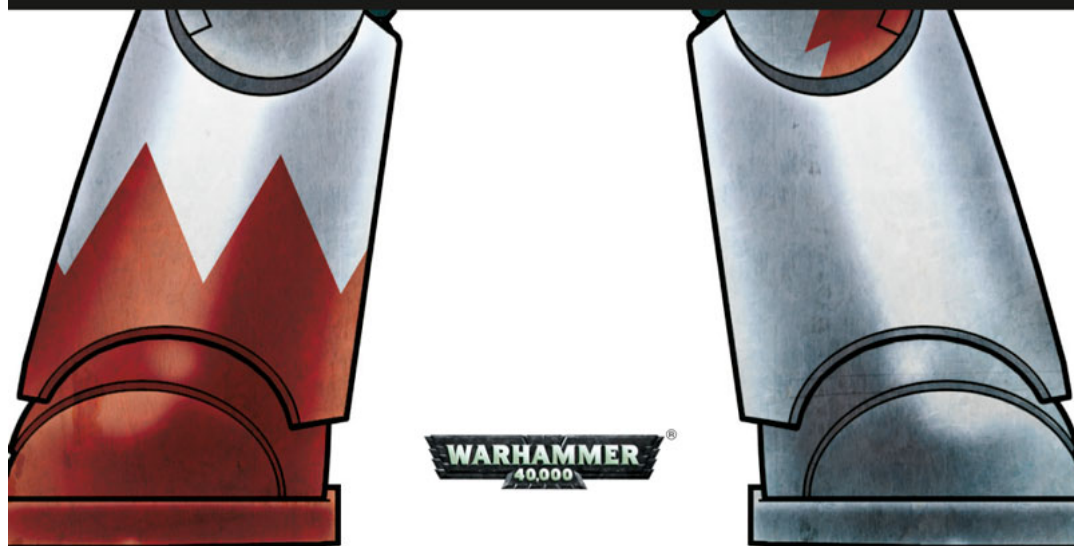
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THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

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WARHAMMER
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THE THRILL OF THE HUNT

Anthony Reynolds

He lowers the magnoculars. He has seen enough. The enemy are here; the Hunt will ride before the twin suns set.

His name is Ajai Khan. He was born in the saddle, on a world of wide skies and open plains. He has not truly been human for seventy-three years, but he still remembers.

He squints against the glare of the lower, yellow sun reflecting off the snow. He is not wearing his helmet – he never does when outriding. His face is the colour of tanned leather. His scalp is shaved on the sides, but he wears his hair long on top. It is charcoal-black and bound in a long tail that hangs down his back. Ritual scars mar his high cheeks. They are jagged, and resemble thunder bolts, mirroring the markings acid-etched upon the heavy white plates of his armour.

Ajai Khan stands astride a heavy bike, a big muscular, brutish thing, as he looks down upon the enemy from the edge of a forested bluff. The wind rippling the razor-leafed pines is bone-numbingly cold. It feels good against his skin.

The wind changes abruptly. It is what saves him.

A new scent reaches his nostrils, something exotic that he cannot instantly place, like an unknown, but not unpleasant, mix of spices. It is close. It is... *alien*.

The enemy are upon him.

His head snaps around and he sees one of them, close. It is coming at him up the lee of the bluff. It is slender, almost spindly, climbing on all fours like an insect, arms and legs splayed. Its armour is a dull grey-green and segmented, and its helm is strangely elongated, ending in jutting mandibles. Its lenses glitter, black and soulless.

He aims and fires. His bolt pistol bucks. There is a distinct double-cough as the bolt is launched from the barrel then ignites, propelling itself towards the target. In the same instant, the bike roars into life beneath him, like a beast angry at having been disturbed from slumber.

The xenos are quick, inhumanly so. The enemy scuttles to the side, avoiding his first shot. It detonates within the rock hidden beneath the snow. He sees more of them now, creeping and arachnid. The time for stealth is past – the xenos rise as one and sprint towards him, running lightly atop the thin crust of snow.

Ajai Khan brings his bike slewing around, kicking up a spray of white, and snaps off two more shots. Both miss their mark, but they at least slow the enemy. Marginally.

Holstering his pistol, he guns the bike. It launches forward with a throaty roar, like a steed given its head. He thumbs firing runes and twin bolters bark. He catches one of the xenos, the closest, with a glancing blow that tears off an arm. Blood sprays across the snow. Even their blood smells wrong. Stray bolts fell a pine, which crashes earthwards with a torturous groan, and kick up snow and ice.

They try to intercept him, slender chain-blades whirring and delicate pistols flashing. Flickers of light spear from their mandibles and biting pain cuts along his left side. He doesn't have the time or space to draw his long-hafted glaive. He slews his bike into one of them, slamming into it with bone-shattering force. It is hurled away and smashes into a tree. When it falls, its limbs are bent unnaturally beneath it. Then Ajai Khan hunkers down low in the saddle and lays on more power. The bike accelerates willingly.

A chain-blade swings at him and he ducks to the side. It rips out a chunk of his fairing. More dart-like flashes strike at him, biting and stinging, but then he is away, hurtling through the forest at speed. The trees flash by him. He knows that he is hurt – he feels blood trickling inside his plate – but he doesn't feel any pain. All he feels is the rush of wind against his face, and he smiles.

There are others in the trees, running on paths parallel to his own. It defies logic, but they are keeping pace with him, sprinting through the shadow of the bladed firs, ghosting him like pack-predators.

This is not how it is meant to be. The White Scars are the hunters. They are not meant to be the hunted.

He leads them on, never slowing, ducking under low-hanging branches and skidding around ice-encased boulders the size of Warhound Titans.

More of them have joined the hunt now. Dart-like jetbikes are accelerating through the trees behind him, closing fast. For a moment, he feels a pang of what might be jealousy, or longing. Once, the Chapter had ridden above the ground. Now, only a handful of jetbikes remain in the Imperium, and Ajai Khan will be unlikely to ever see one, let alone ride to war in the saddle of one of those revered steeds.

He pushes the errant thought aside and veers hard to the right. He hits a snow-covered ridge at speed, launching into the air. He stands in the saddle, keeping balance as the engines scream. He hits the ground hard and accelerates, pushing the bike to its limits. He is in open terrain now, relishing the speed. Ahead is a line of trees, but the enemy are fast; he is not going to make it. He slams on the brakes and brings the back wheel around sharply, spinning to face his pursuers. The time for running is done.

It is almost dark now, and the shadows are long. He unhooks his long-hafted glaive, taking the comforting weight in his hand.

The eldar descend on him, coming over the ridge in a wave. They spread wide to encircle him, thinking that this is the last desperate stand of a prey finally realising it can run no further.

They are wrong.

They are out in the open, halfway between him and the ridge, when they realise their folly. By then it is too late – they have come too far to turn back.

With a deafening roar, his brethren emerge from the tree-line behind him. It is a sight to behold – a full arrowhead of charging White Scars, leaning forward in the saddles of their bikes, glaive-points lowering as they come in for the kill.

The engine of Ajai Khan's bike bellows in greeting and he accelerates sharply, lowering his own glaive. His brethren fall in around him, letting him take the point of the arrowhead.

This is the way that war was meant to be waged – at speed.

Ajai Khan laughs aloud, and his brothers laugh with him as they sweep in for the kill.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANTHONY REYNOLDS'S work for Black Library includes the Word Bearers trilogy, the Knights of Bretonnia series and the Horus Heresy short stories 'Scions of the Storm' and 'Dark Heart'. Originally from Australia, Anthony moved to the UK where he worked within Games Workshop for many years before returning to his homeland. He is currently touring the world, taking inspiration from natural wonders that he can twist into devious monstrosities to populate the 41st Millennium.



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